



Going Low-carb? What You Should Know

YOU MAY NOT know it, but there are more reasons than just the approaching swimsuit season to eat healthy and get plenty of physical activity. Overweight and obesity are major risk factors for chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and cancer. Establishing a lifelong commitment to maintaining a healthy weight may be one of the best things you can do to be heart-healthy and disease-free.

In the aftermath of the holidays, one of the many popular high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets may seem like a magic bullet that will quickly shed those extra pounds. But although such a diet may help you in the short-term, in the long run it may be no more successful than traditional eating plans based on foods from all the food groups.

“It’s true that most people probably do consume too many simple carbohydrates,” said Rachel Cox, a registered dietitian with the Heart Disease & Stroke Prevention Program. “But the most effective method for healthy, lifelong weight management includes an eating plan that is based on whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, moderate in protein and relatively low in fat, and coupled with daily physical activity.”

The popular high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets are often based on the idea that carbohydrates are bad, that many people are “allergic” to them or are insulin-resistant, and that they gain weight when they eat them. The truth is that people are eating more total calories and getting less physical activity, and that is the real reason they are gaining weight.

Not only are high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets often high in fat, they also tend to be low in calcium and fiber, as well as healthy phytochemicals, important plant chemicals that help fight cancer and heart disease. Some authors of these fad diets advise taking vitamin-mineral supplements to replace lost nutrients. However, supplements should “bridge the gap” in healthy eating and not be used as a replacement for nutrient-rich foods.

If taken to the extreme, high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets may be dangerous to your health. The authors of these plans often advocate taking advantage of ketosis to accelerate weight loss. Ketosis is an abnormal body process that occurs during starvation due to lack of carbohydrates. Ketosis can cause fatigue, constipation, nausea, and vomiting. Potential long-term side effects of ketosis include heart disease, bone loss, and kidney damage.

If you still want to try a “carbohydrate-restricted” diet, Cox suggests trying to stay within the recommended percentages of

calories from carbohydrates, fat, and protein. According to the American Dietetics Association, adults should get 45 percent to 65 percent of their calories from carbohydrates, 20 percent to 35 percent from fat, and 10 percent to 35 percent from protein. These recommendations still provide you with a good deal of room to increase your level of protein while lowering your fat intake. Carbohydrates should be complex, meaning whole grains such as whole wheat pasta.

Keep in mind that many people have trouble sticking to low-carbohydrate eating plans and often give up. A high dropout rate is a sign that extreme diets are difficult to maintain. A balanced diet and regular physical activity may be just the ticket.

Considering a Popular Diet Plan? For the Sake of Your Health, Check It Out First

Diet books routinely top the best-seller lists, and new plans come out every day. Do they work? Will any of them be right for you?

If you’re considering a popular diet plan, you owe it to yourself and your health to make sure its claims are valid. Does your diet plan ...

- Promise a quick fix?
- Encourage or require you to stop eating certain foods, food groups, or products?
- Rely on a single study as the basis for its recommendations?
- Contradict recommendations of reputable health organizations?
- Identify “good” and “bad” foods?
- Tout a specific product?
- Sound too good to be true?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, perhaps you should keep looking for a plan that is backed by solid research, lets you keep eating a balanced diet from all the food groups, and allows for flexibility.

Keep in mind that the best source for making healthful changes to your diet is a health care provider or dietetics professional with the training and expertise to help you develop an eating plan that is right for you. For more information, visit www.eatright.org.

Source: Adapted from the American Dietetics Association, January 2004

For more information about adding physical activity to your weight loss plans, visit www.utahwalks.org.